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India's Saffron Summer of 2019...and Some Outliers



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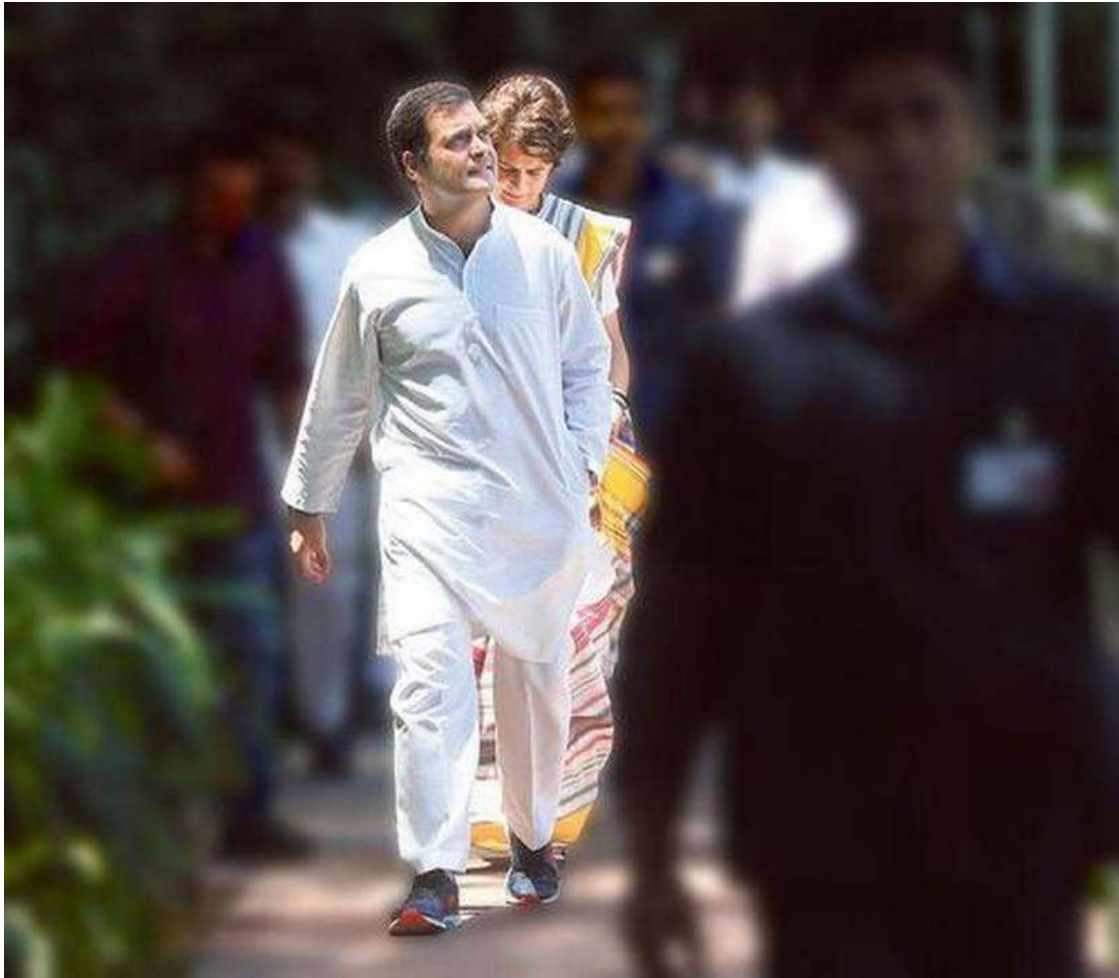


A supporter of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) holds up the party symbol during an election campaign rally in Hyderabad, India, Monday, April 1, 2019. The party swept the polls, giving it a second successive term of office. Photo: AP/Mahesh Kumar A

The 2019 General Election verdict has equally stunned the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party which has returned with an even bigger mandate and the Opposition which was clearly not expecting to be trounced this badly. The Congress's second consecutive defeat is a harder blow because as recently as November 2018, it had won three state elections. The party also mistakenly banked on the newly assertive leadership of Rahul Gandhi, who in the end could not even retain Amethi. The other big casualty of the election was West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee who had deluded herself into thinking that the saffron wave would not reach her shores. The BJP crossed seemingly impossible hurdles: unrest in the North-East over the communally divisive Citizenship Bill, a deep agrarian crisis across much of India and the unhappiness of its allies. Vidya Subrahmaniam, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, New Delhi takes a look at the results to try and find answers to why the BJP won big and why the Opposition was challenged everywhere except in the three states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh.

A bitterly fought election to the Lok Sabha that stretched over 40 long days has ended, leaving the national Opposition battered, bruised, and unable to reconcile to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) second successive victory – this one more spectacular than the one before if that was even possible considering how big and historic 2014 was.

Since then a new council of Ministers headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been sworn in – with two surprise omissions and two surprise inclusions in the Cabinet. Sushma Swaraj and Arun Jaitley who held the Foreign and Finance portfolios respectively in the outgoing Cabinet have exited. Swaraj did not contest the Lok Sabha election while Jaitley ruled himself out citing poor health. On the other hand, BJP President Amit Shah and former Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar have entered the top echelons of governance, one taking the Union Home Ministry and the other the External Affairs Ministry.



Congress party President Rahul Gandhi arrives for a Congress Working Committee meeting, followed by his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, in New Delhi, India, Saturday, May 25, 2019. Photo: AP

The first indication that the BJP was headed for a massive victory that would take in its sweep nearly all of India came at around 6.30 pm on May 19, 2019 with the conclusion of the last phase of the seven-Phase elections to the 17th Lok Sabha.

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and the political Opposition, all of whose calculations had hinged on a hung Parliament. As against this, the exit poll trends uniformly indicated a majority for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. The India Today –Axis My India poll, with a previous record of accuracy in election forecast, predicted a landslide for Prime Minister Modi with the BJP alone projected to breach the 300 seat-mark and the NDA securing between 339 and 365 seats. There was a surreal

feel to the poll predictions. The figures seemed outlandish given that few people had spotted a wave of this proportion.

However, to the astonishment of most, perhaps even the BJP, the final results matched the exit polls. State after State fell to the BJP as the party made a clean sweep of North and West India, and cut deep inroads into West Bengal, the North East, Orissa and even Telangana. The three States that stood untouched by the tidal wave were Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. But the outliers didn't matter in the final calculations.

What seemed impossible at one time, an *encore* in North and West India, happened with the BJP by itself winning 226 of the 299 seats (75 per cent) on offer in the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Delhi and Uttarakhand. The party added another 38 or so seats with its allies, taking the NDA's tally in the 12 States to around 265 seats (88 per cent).

In other words, the BJP with its NDA allies, had reached a position of being able to form a government, even without venturing out of its comfort zone of North and West India. But that is in hindsight. A simple pre-poll calculation would have shown the Modi-Shah leadership that at least on paper the numbers were tricky.

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In U.P., where the BJP had peaked with 71 of 80 seats in 2014, its task was cut out because of a formidable Opposition in the form of the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party gathbandhan. In the rest of North India, the BJP had won every seat there was to win, and evidently even by the party's own estimates, it had nowhere to go from there but down the slope.

The losses, which could be anything from a few seats to many more, had to be compensated by gains from new areas. With the conquest of North-East already behind it, the BJP turned its attention to West Bengal and Orissa, two States where anti-incumbency was ripe for exploitation. Out of this, Bengal was as challenging as it was vulnerable. Bengalis were deeply attached to their culture but they were also susceptible to communal polarisation because of the state's large Muslim population. In Orissa, not only had Naveen Patnaik done four terms as Chief

Minister, the space for the BJP was provided by the collapse of the Congress, once the largest party in the State.

The BJP's North-East strategy had covered the full gamut, from forming alliances and inducing mass defections of cadre to luring away politically savvy Opposition leaders and the capture of a political party as a whole. For a brief while ahead of the 2019 poll, it seemed as if the BJP's chances in the North-East had been destroyed by its insistence on enacting the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016. The region was in flames over the communally divisive Bill and the BJP's allies, including the Asom Gana Parishad, had broken their ties with it. But the party swiftly made amends (the Bill did not find passage in the Rajya Saba), restored its ties with the allies and reworked its election strategy. Today, post the 2019 election, the BJP and its allies are in full control of the region.

In Bengal, where a certain voter fatigue had set in essentially because of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's highhanded ways, the BJP worked on its already perfected strategy of Hindu-Muslim polarisation. Two factors worked in its favour here. One, Bengal, which shared its borders with Bangladesh, felt the domino effect of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill. While Assam was against the Bill, in Bengal, the Hindu population was receptive to it, seeing it as a tool to stop the Muslim influx from across the border. Two, the State's 27 per cent Muslim population was virtually at the beck and call of Chief Minister Banerjee. Banerjee's active wooing of Muslims, especially the clergy, set the stage for the BJP's exploitation of the simmering Hindu angst against *didi's* 'Muslim appeasement'. The BJP also reached out to the thousands of Left cadre looking for avenues to escape Banerjee's witch-hunt against them.

In Orissa, the BJP worked on the ground to fill the void left behind by the Congress. Little by little it made progress and before long had dislodged the Congress from the second position.

The Congress and its misplaced priorities

Why did the Modi wave catch pundits by surprise? Was it that they were lazy? No. The BJP's push in Orissa and Bengal was visible to everyone. Yet, few believed the party would succeed so spectacularly. It seemed fair to assume that in both States

the party would increase its vote share substantially but would not win too many seats. The BJP in fact did both. In Bengal, its vote share crossed 40 per cent – way beyond the wildest projections and it won 18 of 42 seats. The Trinamool Congress finished just ahead with 22 seats and a vote share of 43 per cent. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), which had ruled Bengal for a quarter century, drew a blank and polled just 6 per cent, indicating that its voters had turned to the BJP in overwhelming numbers. In Orissa, the BJP got 8 out of 21 seats for a vote share of 38.37 per cent. The Biju Janata Dal won 12 seats for a vote share of just under 43 per cent.

But the shocker was U.P. where the BJP dealt a knock out blow to the *gathbandhan*. Where the SP-BSP alliance was expected to pick up a minimum share of 40 seats, it got only 15. In western U.P., the *gathbandhan*'s triangular seat-sharing arrangement with the Ajit Singh-led Rashtriya Lok Dal bombed with the Jats, the RLD's mainstay, fully shifting to the BJP. A post-poll survey by the Centre for the study of Developing Societies (CSDS) showed that 91 per cent of Jats had voted the BJP. Elsewhere the *gathbandhan*, though strong, and with a fair degree of vote transfer between the allies, failed because the BJP outwitted it by dramatically increasing its vote share – from 42.3 per cent in 2014 to 49.56 per cent. How did this happen? Answers must await a more serious evaluation because prima facie there was a lot that the BJP was up against, including a severe agrarian crisis that had driven farmers to ruin. The BJP did put in place some welfare measures but these didn't seem sufficient to fetch the party 62 seats in a contest against a strong alliance. The only immediate answer, if one has to be found, is that Modi prevailed as did the message of nationalism he untiringly conveyed through a friendly media that projected him to the exclusion of all other leaders. Besides, the Congress played a destructive role in U.P. and cost the *gathbandhan* directly and indirectly around half-a-dozen seats.

The Congress strategy was something that only the party could fathom. For all others, the party seemed on a death wish. The Congress ventured into U.P. where it was weak and where its presence threatened the *gathbandhan*'s prospects, and chose to ignore the States where it was in a one-to-one contest with the BJP. Worse, it brought out its trump card, Priyanka Gandhi, without giving her time to get her act

together. Giving her charge of Eastern U.P. made little political sense. The Congress's miscalculation was further exposed by the defeat of Rahul Gandhi in his

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own family bastion of Amethi. Had the Congress left U.P. to the SP-BSP alliance and concentrated on the States where it had performed well in the assembly elections, it is likely it would have contained the enormous losses it suffered across North India. The Congress had performed creditably in the December 2017 Gujarat assembly election and had won the three States of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh in November 2018. However, it got wiped out in all the States defying a long-established trend of parties winning State elections being able to replicate their performance in Lok Sabha elections held in proximity.



DMK President MK Stalin greets the cadets at the party office on Thursday, May 23, 2019 after securing a massive victory over AIADMK and BJP in Tamil Nadu, Lok Sabha election 2019. Photo: M. Karunakaran

The Congress also messed up alliance-making, missing the chance to tie up with the Aam Aadmi Party in Haryana and Delhi where 18 seats were at stake, and entering into prolonged negotiations with prospective allies in Bihar. This was in contrast to the BJP moving swiftly to repair ties with the Shiv Sena, with allies in the North

East, and with the Janata Dal (united) in Bihar. In Bihar, where the BJP had won 22 seats on its own in 2014, it agreed to contest on only 17 in the larger interest of maximising seats for the NDA.

The question before outliers

So we have a picture of a fallen North India and three southern States, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, withstanding the wave. In Orissa, Naveen Patnaik has won the State election for the fifth time running but the BJP is creeping up on him. In Telangana, the BJP bagged four seats for an impressive vote share of 19.45 per cent. In Andhra Pradesh, the BJP's failure was partly on account of the break up of its alliance with the Chandrababu-led Telugu Desam Party. In 2014, the BJP-TDP alliance had swept Andhra Pradesh but this time the BJP was alone -- a situation it will no doubt rectify using the enormous powers and resources at its command as a ruling party with a double success.

Will Tamil Nadu, where protests are already on over the Centre's attempts to impose Hindi, continue to stand in magnificent opposition to the Hindi-Hindu BJP?

Two questions remain: Will Tamil Nadu, where protests are already on over the Centre's attempts to impose Hindi, continue to stand in magnificent opposition to the Hindi-Hindu BJP? If so, for how long? Neighbouring Kerala showed its vulnerability during the Sabarimala agitation. Will it be able to guard itself against a West Bengal-model ambush?

[**Vidya Subrahmaniam** is Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. She was until recently Associate Editor with *The Hindu* based in New Delhi. In a journalistic career spanning four decades, she has written and reported extensively in a number of newspapers in Chennai, Mumbai, Lucknow and Delhi. She has also served on the national news bureaus of *The Indian Express*, *The Indian Post*, *The Independent*, *The Statesman*, and was an opinion page writer for *The Times of India*. In 2013, she won the Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism in the category, 'Commentary and Interpretative Writing'.]